

Assessing the Six-Day War

Amos Perlmutter

TWO AND A HALF years have now elapsed since the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, and thus far the flood of literature on the conflict shows no signs of abating; indeed, the continuing state of hostility in the region seems to have encouraged a corresponding flow of ever-new analyses and proposals. Some of the numerous studies which have appeared are sound, some not so; some are based on keen historical understanding and insight, others are either frankly or covertly tendentious and propagandistic. In the survey of the literature which follows, I have limited myself to the more representative works on the subject—and specifically those which I regard to be among the more responsible—as a way of introducing the reader to what I take to be the major issues and forces at play in the Middle East.

Of the books published in the immediate aftermath of the war, three in particular are to be recommended for their usefulness as general guides to the Middle East predicament: Walter Laqueur's *The Road to Jerusalem**; Theodore Draper's *Israel and World Politics*†; and Fred J. Khouri's *The Arab-Israeli Dilemma***. Laqueur's work is by far the best English-language account of the events leading up to the June war; it includes skillful analyses of the Arab, Israeli, and world press on the eve of the war and an extended exploration of inter- and intra-Arab conflicts and the roles these played in developing the crisis of May 1967. (A second edition of *The Road to Jerusalem*, brought out in 1969 by Penguin Books, contains an invaluable additional chapter on developments in the Middle East since the war, as well

as on the continuing Soviet role in the Arab countries and in the UN.) Draper's *Israel and World Politics* (an expanded and revised version of an article published in the August 1967 COMMENTARY) concentrates in a highly competent and scrupulously exact way on the literature of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and is especially good on the relationship between Egypt and the Soviet Union; its major contribution is Draper's account—based on a reading of the Soviet press, official documents, and the work of Kremlinologists—of the Soviet role in the Middle East.

Khouri's *The Arab-Israeli Dilemma*, finally, is an academic work whose focus is an exhaustive and rather tedious account of the treatment of the Palestine Question in the United Nations from 1948 through June 1967, and the controversial Security Council Resolution of November 22, 1967. Khouri believes strongly in the UN as the chief agency for the eventual Arab-Israeli settlement. His Sisyphean attempt to disentangle the positions taken by the various contenders before the United Nations Council and assemblies is admirable, but I think ultimately fruitless. No author who has studied the Middle East conflict could argue in good faith that the dilemma originated in the UN or that it will ultimately be resolved by the Security Council, a body whose effectiveness has been marred by power-bloc politics and by the decline in the influence of the great powers over the concert of new nations.

A MORE recent general survey of the Middle East conflict is Nadav Safran's *From War to War: The Arab-Israeli Confrontation 1948-1967*.‡ In the first section of this work Safran clearly establishes an evolutionary pattern, characterized by continuous geometric escalation, in Arab-Jewish relations; he traces this pattern from a rel-

atively non-explosive phase of Zionist-Palestinian rivalry in 1936, to a higher stage of intensity when the conflict became Arabized after 1936, and finally to the internationalization of the conflict in 1948 and its incorporation within the framework of the East-West cold war.

Safran then turns in the second part of the book to an analysis of the conflict in relation to the dynamics of the arms race. His conclusions here are significant: the parties to the conflict (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia) had spent by 1964 "higher percentages of their GNP on defense than any other countries in the world except the Soviet Union." More important, Egypt, according to Safran, was failing by 1967 to reach its objective of surpassing or, at least, matching Israel in the arms race—hence one of Nasser's major reasons for going to war in 1967: since the strain on Egypt's resources was greater than that on Israel's, a comparison of the exertion required for Egypt and Israel to keep up the arms race—as indicated by the ratio of defense outlays to GNP—dictated that Egypt go to war before the gap became any wider. The last part of the book is a summary of the June war.

From War to War is an ambitious undertaking, covering most of the ground of the Arab-Israeli conflict; it has, however, some serious faults. The first part has been done before; the last part, a summary of the Six-Day War, is an unsuccessful attempt to deduce the conclusions summarized at the end of the book from the causes presented in earlier parts. The second part of the book—Safran's analysis of the dynamics of the arms race and his attempt to apply this analysis to the Arab-Israeli conflict—is truly original and thought-provoking; but it is in this section that the problems become most disturbing. It is questionable, for instance, whether the arms race actually was, or still is, a primary factor in deter-

* Macmillan, 368 pp., \$6.95.

† Viking, 278 pp., \$5.95.

** Syracuse University Press, 436 pp., \$10.00.

‡ Pegasus, 467 pp., \$10.00.

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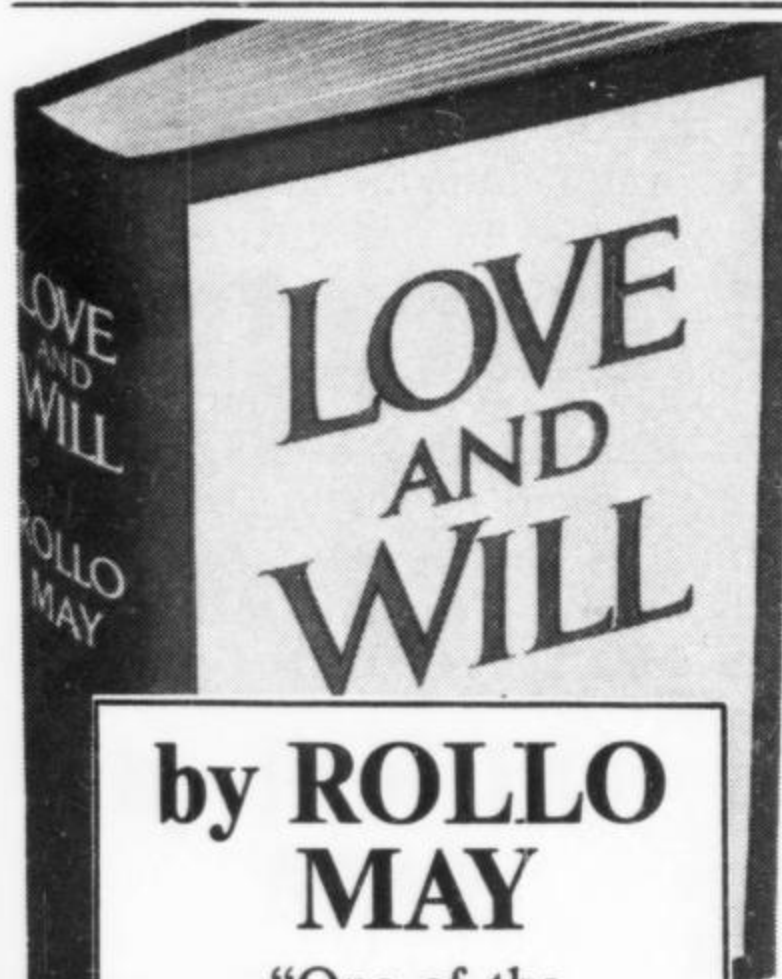
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mining strategy in the Middle East conflict; nor do Safran's numbers and tables persuade me that Nasser and his military junta really went to war because they discovered "the tragic drain" on their resources and had to do something quickly before Israel stabilized its military supremacy. In the end, only Nasser himself could determine the validity of the theory, and, in view of his silence on this point, there are other more plausible explanations that can be applied far less questionably.

But Safran's "exertion" thesis is disputable on more basic grounds as well. Safran demonstrates Egypt's exertion in the arms race with Israel by comparing the defense budget with the GNP and finding Egypt's to be inordinately high and constantly increasing. In fact, these statistics are misleading, for Egypt does not actually *pay* for her arms; Russia bestows upon Nasser almost all of his military hardware, while Israel's arms are neither so easily nor so cheaply acquired. It would be permissible to say that Egypt "spends" money on arms if the country had a choice between receiving guns or butter, but Russia gives Egypt no such choice. And it is surely misleading to talk about exertion and strain when Egypt can use her defense "budget" for nothing *but* defense.

WHAT is Russia's interest in arming Egypt? This, and the question of the larger Soviet role in the Middle East and Asia, is the subject of Uri Ra'anani's *The USSR Arms the Third World*.^{*} A veteran Sovietologist, Ra'anani has assigned himself the formidable task of investigating the genesis of Soviet penetration into the Middle East; for this purpose he focuses on the "Czech"-Egyptian arms deal of 1955 which, he maintains, was the first major manifestation of what eventually became a concerted Russian effort to establish a political foothold in the region. Ra'anani asserts that this arms deal, contrary to conventional interpretations, did not result from an Egyptian-Soviet "reaction" to a U.S. refusal to give Egypt weapons; Nasser, in fact, had entered into negotiations

with Moscow in January-February 1955, *before* requesting arms from Washington (and prior to Israel's Gaza raid of February 28, 1955, which consequently could not have been the reason for Nasser's turning away from his would-be Western patrons). According to Ra'anani, the Soviets had decided, *before any of these events took place*, to end decades of Stalinist abstention from Middle Eastern activity and had begun to engineer a political entry into the region. Ra'anani also reveals that the Soviet decision to move into the Middle East was forged in a series of critical factional rivalries in Moscow, coinciding with Western attempts to build up the so-called "Northern Tier" of the region.

In support of his contention, Ra'anani quotes Soviet documents and contemporary Western sources which indicate that the arms deal was initiated between February 14 and 21, 1955, a full seven months before it was announced to the world. Thus, it appears that the dogmatic interpretation offered by some American analysts—namely, that John Foster Dulles, in his missionary zeal, mismanaged America's "real" interests in Egypt—is wrong and self-deceptive. (In the light of Ra'anani's disclosures it is also difficult to accept the frequently repeated claim that so-called "domestic pressure groups" somehow caused America to lose her "stake" in Egypt and throughout the Middle East.)

Much that has been written on the Baghdad Pact, the Northern Tier, Middle Eastern defense, Egyptian foreign policy since 1955, and the effects of Israeli "over-reaction" requires serious revision now that Ra'anani has revealed details of the Soviet *modus operandi* in the region, i.e., Moscow's active, sometimes malicious, and always self-interested role since 1954 in striving for leverage over the Middle Eastern international subsystem. In the light of Ra'anani's convincing analysis, one must conclude that it is not so much the "failure" of Dulles's policy, as American naiveté when faced with Soviet maneuvers, that has been most deleterious to U.S. interests. Washington has not real-

^{*} M.I.T. Press, 256 pp., \$10.00.

ized, or admitted to itself, the natural—almost inevitable—convergence between Moscow and “anti-colonial” movements and the fact that a new generation of Arab nationalists has turned irrevocably away from the Western orientation of its fathers and grandfathers.

From 1954-55 on, Washington failed to see that the Moscow “revisionists” and radical Arab nationalists were forging an alliance under the very noses of U.S. diplomats whose policies were based upon anachronistic Wilsonian slogans like “self-determination” in a region where such ideas are hardly very meaningful. In the face of the Moscow-Cairo entente, and the real danger it posed to American interests, Washington attempted to accommodate radical Arab nationalists (a line no longer pursued so vigorously, but not yet renounced by the State Department); in so doing, the U.S. strengthened the radicals at the expense of the British, the Arab moderates, the Israelis—and, in the long run, of the U.S. “presence” itself.

LET ME turn now to a group of books which concern themselves directly with Israeli ideology. Maurice Samuel's *Light on Israel*,* published shortly after the June war, is a classic defense of Zionism. Samuel, the dean of American Zionist ideologists and activists, calls upon all those involved in the defense of a Jewish state, Israelis included, to restate forcefully the moral, historical, and intellectual claim of Jews to the Jewish homeland in Palestine. “For the Zionist,” Samuel declares, “the moral perspective has not altered.” His “testimony”—which in my view deserves to be pondered thoroughly by Israelis and Jews in the Diaspora alike—does not however constitute an adequate guide to the politics of Israel or the Arab countries today.

To put it briefly, the June war liberated Israel from the trauma of besiegement, and dispensed with the need for antiquated Zionist interpretations of the nature of Arab nationalism. To be sure, the basic principles which Samuel espouses cannot be disputed. He notes, for example, that “as long

as the Arabs consider the mere existence of Israel an act of aggression, everything she does must be wrong. The only good Israel is a dead Israel.” And it follows from this that “the two most important principles that must guide [Israel] are self-preservation and fidelity to the best in her character.” Nevertheless, the view that Arabs have no moral claim over Palestine, or that their nationalism, because latent, is also abortive, is in my opinion false to everything Israel stands for. We are told that the Arab claim to Palestine is spurious, but this is not so. A Palestinian political entity does in fact exist; paradoxically, it was the Israelis themselves who assisted in its birth of consciousness by “liberating” the Palestinians from the Hashemite kingdom in 1967. To assert in 1969 that Palestinian nationalism is “artificial” or contrived is simply to be deluded about the dynamics of modern nationalism in general.

THE EXTREME opposite position to that of Samuel is taken by Uri Avnery in *Israel without Zionists*,† a collection of editorials from the Israeli sex-and-scandal tabloid which Avnery edits. *Israel without Zionists* represents first of all an attempt to correct the “fatal” misconception of pre-World War I Zionists that Palestine was not inhabited, long before Theodor Herzl envisioned the Jewish state, by non-Jews who happened to be Arab-Semites. But Avnery goes beyond this to issue a call for a pan-Semitic union of Israelis and Palestinians which in its outlines resembles nothing so much as old-fashioned binationalism.

Avnery's *Pax Semitica* is based on the idea that Israeli domination of the West Bank has made possible a convergence of interest with what he takes to be the “progressivism” of Al-Fatah, the Syrian Ba'athists, and American and European New Leftism. He proposes the establishment of “a great confederation of all the states” in the Middle East, a union of Semitic peoples which will “end fear and suspicion . . .

* Knopf, 212 pp., \$4.95.

† Macmillan, 368 pp., \$6.95.

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align with the Afro-Asian bloc . . . and be economically advantageous." There is nothing particularly new in this scheme; several Jewish and Israeli thinkers have put forward identical proposals over the last thirty years. What is most puzzling, however, is why Avnery thinks the Arabs should want to join such a union, dominated as it would be—he admits as much—by Israeli military might. It is perhaps needless to add that no sign has as yet been forthcoming that the Arab multitudes wish to reciprocate Avnery's gesture, nor has a single progressive Arab intellectual or politician responded to his proposal.

Avnery's views are of course not typical of Israelis in general, any more than are the views of his opposite numbers who belong to the "Movement for the Whole of Eretz Israel" (for an exposition of the ideas of this movement, see "Faith in Israel" by Harold Fisch in COMMENTARY, February 1969). Indeed, there is a curious similarity between these two positions, the one urging a pan-Semitic union, the other championing brute Israeli territorial annexation. What links them is their common abandonment of the moral basis—so well described by Maurice Samuel—of the Zionist claim to Israel. Whereas proponents of the "Movement for the Whole of Eretz Israel" locate the root of their political program in a vague biblical metaphysic devoid of explicit moral content, Avnery simply asserts that morality in the Middle East conflict resides solely with the Arab cause. Both positions reflect a blithe indifference to the kinds of human and political considerations that must necessarily play a decisive role in any attempted settlement of the just grievances of all parties concerned.

But what are the views of Israelis in general? One source of raw material is to be found in *Siah Lohamim* ("Warriors Speak"), a collection of interviews with kibbutzniks who fought in the Six-Day War. Although members of kibbutzim make up only 3 to 4 per cent of the Israeli population as a whole, they sustained 25 per cent of the casualties in the 1967

war; as a group, kibbutzniks are disproportionately represented in the elite fighting units and among the senior officer corps and the Israel High Command. What makes the views of such people of particular import is the historical role the kibbutz has played in the shaping of modern Israeli ideology. From its inception the kibbutz was oriented toward universalist goals and at the same time dedicated to the concept of nation-building as a tool for expanding social and political welfare. The fathers of the young men who performed so spectacularly in 1967 had been active in the formation of the pre-State Haganah and had made extraordinary contributions to the success of Aliyah Bet—the program of illegal immigration to Palestine that operated systematically from 1938 to 1948. If nothing else, the conversations recorded in *Siah Lohamim* would provide an excellent reference point for a discussion of the character of the Israeli military elite; but its true value as a document lies elsewhere.

About 140 Israeli soldiers and officers are represented in *Siah Lohamim*. In the interviews, which were conducted a month after the war, they were questioned as to their attitudes on nationalism, the Arabs, war and its costs, and so forth. They were also asked to express themselves frankly with regard to their own experiences and emotions under battle conditions. The resulting volume reveals an almost universal horror at the brutality of war, a craving for genuine friendship with Arabs, an astonishingly low incidence of hatred for the enemy, and, among the officers, with few exceptions, a restrained and humane dovishness—in short, what Maurice Samuel would regard as fidelity to the best in Israel's character. To be sure, *Siah Lohamim* is limited in its sample to kibbutzniks, and even that sample is not a random one; the sentiments it unfolds should not be regarded as true without exception of Israeli society in general, or even of Israeli soldiers as a whole. Nevertheless, it represents an important first step in an approach to understanding the Israeli mind. The as-

sumptions, expectations, doubts, perceptions, and misperceptions of these young people supply much-needed material for any analysis of the political attitudes of the present generation of Israelis.

ANOTHER interesting portrait of the Israeli at war is Shabtai Teveth's *The Tanks of Tammuz*.^{*} This is a journalist's account of the performance of the Israel Armor Division in the 1967 war, and an analysis of the modal Israeli personality under combat conditions. It is, among other things, an excellent corrective supplement to Safran's analysis of the Six-Day War, which, in its statistical tables and neat balancing of arms quantities, completely neglects the qualitative differences between the Arabs and the Israelis—differences which in the end were crucial and decisive. The qualities that emerge from Teveth's narrative are those of extreme cohesiveness among units, a direct command-soldier relationship, initiative and daring in the middle-echelon command. This last is of special note, since the press and military analysts in general, both Israeli and foreign, have tended to focus on the High Command and the senior officer corps; although it is true that the impeccable and meticulous efforts of the High Command, its ingenious grand strategy, and the resourcefulness and excellent tactical ability of the senior officers determined the course of the 1967 campaign, the *blitz* would never have succeeded as it did without the middle-echelon officers whom Teveth describes.

Teveth's analysis of operation "Division Steamroller," led by Colonel Shmuel, the divisional commander, in which seventy Egyptian tanks were destroyed on the road to Suez without a single loss to Shmuel's division, demonstrates with particular clarity the human advantage enjoyed by the Israelis in combat: group cohesiveness, unswerving personal loyalty, initiative, and resourcefulness—all under the iron discipline imposed by the commander of the

^{*} Viking, 290 pp., \$6.95.

Armor Division, Major General Israel Tal. It is useful to contrast these qualities with those of Arab soldiers and officers.

Much less is known about the Arab military personality, as about the Arab personality in general, but a series of studies conducted by Israeli intelligence on Egyptian prisoners of war in 1956 and 1967 suggests that Arab officers are lacking in dedication to their subordinates and bound excessively to the professional rigidities of military textbooks and drills. Younger officers, in addition, display a better knowledge of military politics than their superiors, among whom was found, on the other hand, a high degree of professionalism. But these findings are inconclusive in the absence both of more copious and systematic source material and of any thorough study of the Arab personality as a whole.

THE WORKS I have discussed go some way toward identifying the immediate precipitants of the Six-Day War and the attitudes of at least some of the interested parties toward the Middle East conflict. To my knowledge, however, no one has as yet addressed himself to the most fundamental task of all, which is to locate and sort out those circumstances—social, psychological, and political—which can guide us to an etiology of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its consequences for international peace and security. In fact most, if not all, of the outpouring of material on the war of 1967 is flawed in the same way: the authors explain what was done, when, where, and by whom, but these explanations are ultimately abortive; they do not tell us, really, *why* violence broke out the way it did. Khouri's work, for example, demonstrates what can happen to an academic

study when it fails to focus on its true subject matter—the nature and causes of the Arab-Israeli conflict—and directs its attention instead to the consequences—the presentation of damages by the parties in conflict before the councils of the UN. All this boils down to the question of who fired the first shot or who is to be blamed, i.e., against whom are sanctions to be imposed. Now, that may in the end be all the Security Council is required to do or can do these days, but the attempt to establish such dubious facts is of no help whatsoever in explaining what ignited the flames in the first place or even, granted the limited scope of Khouri's inquiry, why the UN has exercised a precipitating rather than a repressive influence in the Middle East conflict.

Some insight into these more basic questions could be gained from an exhaustive, painstaking investigation into the intellectual and behavioral fabric of Arab and Israeli society, an in-depth analysis of what Pareto has called the "mind of society." Such an analysis would take into account aspects of personal and social psychology, respective attitudes toward politics, elite-mass relations, Arab and Israeli views of what constitutes the "public interest," and so forth. Thus far, the only even tentative effort in this direction has been Yehoshaphat Harkabi's Hebrew work, *The Arab Position in the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, analyzed in these pages at some length by Robert Alter ("Rhetoric and the Arab Mind," September 1968). This work, which is far and away the most comprehensive on the subject, is nevertheless only a first step toward an understanding of how the Arabs conceive their case against Israel. The fact that no parallel study has been done on the Israeli position

should suffice to indicate the paucity of our knowledge on these matters.

STILL, I do not mean to suggest that personal, socio-psychological, and behavioral analyses, although they are badly needed, will furnish a full explanation of political conflict in the Middle East, any more than do chronological or synoptical histories of the kind offered by Laqueur, Khouri, or Safran. The major political problem in the Middle East, as in other developing regions throughout the world, is the formation of a stable order in the midst of rapid social change. Of all the parties involved, only Israel may be said to have approached that kind of stability. The Arab countries are marked, to a greater or lesser degree in individual cases, by a profound imbalance between political demands and political effectiveness—the ability of a government to fulfill demands—by radical praetorianism, characterized by a constant threat of intervention by the military into domestic politics, and by an asymmetry between the political aspirations of the Arab peoples and their ideologically enforced relation to the Palestine question. The role the great powers have played over the past decades has had the effect of aggravating rather than of alleviating these internal problems, with the result that today, after three successive defeats in battle with Israel, most Arab governments are no closer to political legitimacy than they were twenty years ago. Until sustained thought and study are given to these questions, our understanding of the Middle East will continue to be partial, misdirected, and without real value in the hard world where decisions must be made and policies executed.